SINATRA

80 YEARS

of GREAT PERFORMANCES

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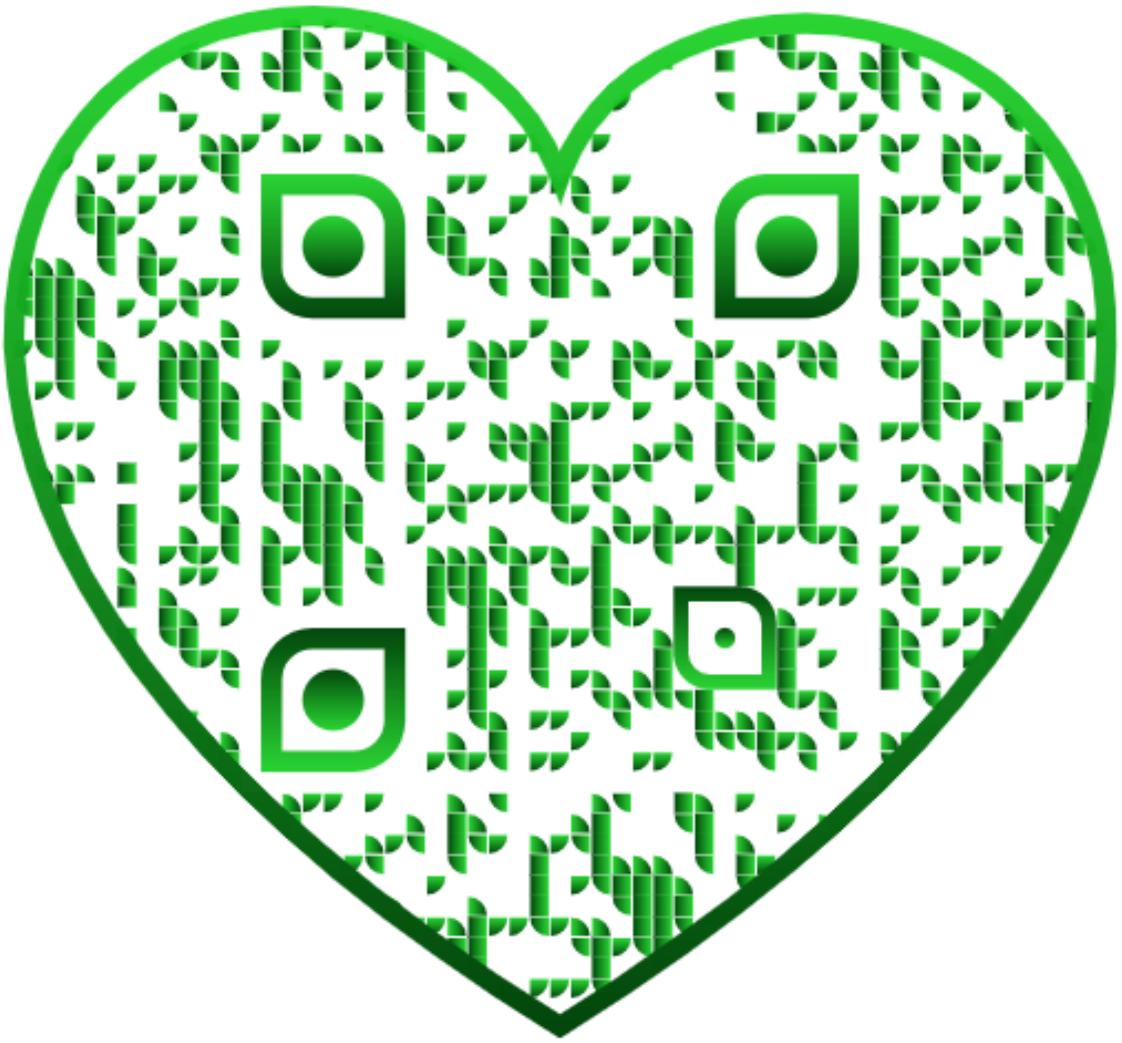

SINATRA

80 YEARS

of **GREAT PERFORMANCES**

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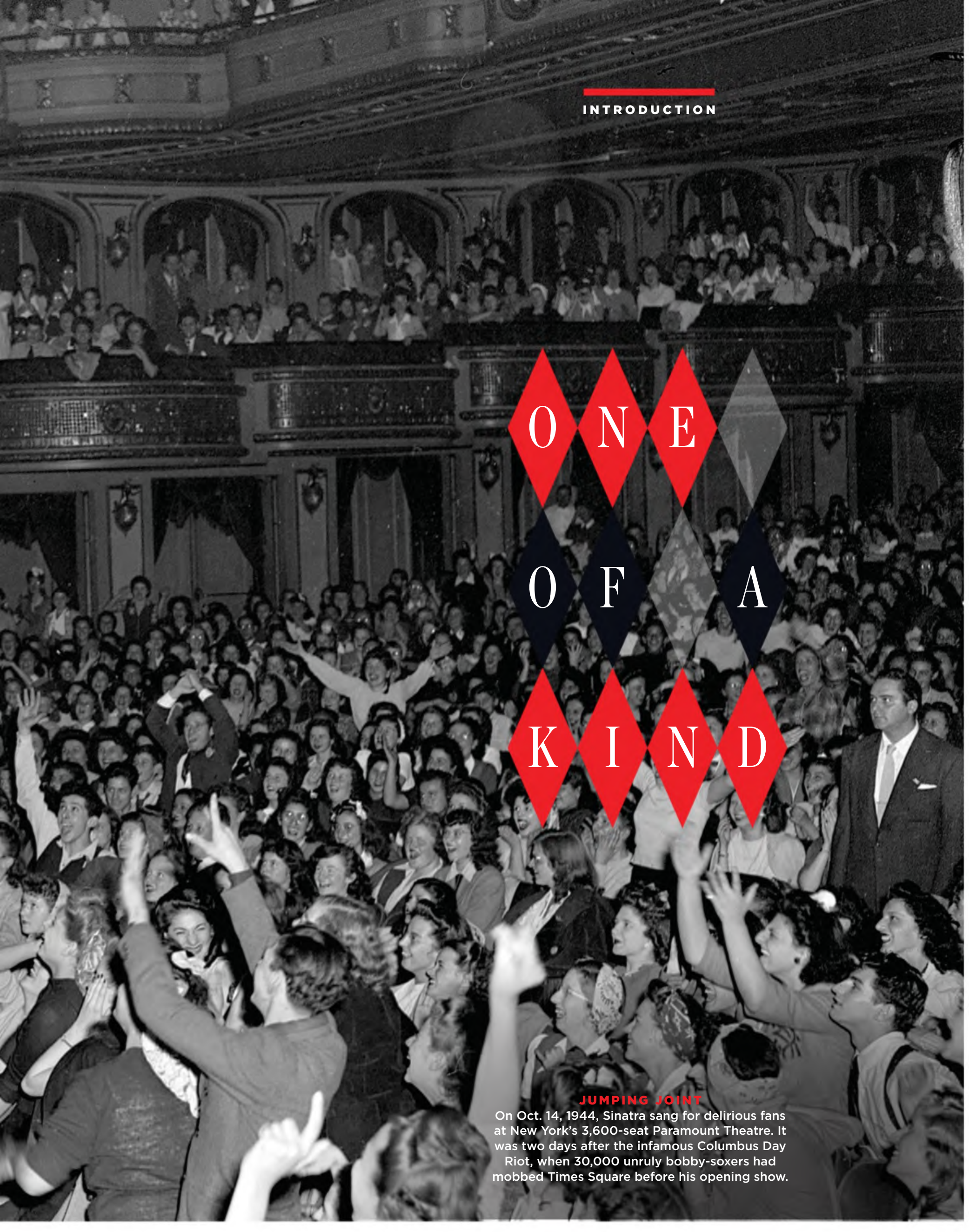
ONE OF A KIND



JUMPING JOINT
On Oct. 14, 1944, Sinatra sang for delirious fans at New York's 3,600-seat Paramount Theatre. It was two days after the infamous Columbus Day Riot, when 30,000 unruly bobby-soxers had mobbed Times Square before his opening show.

Frank Sinatra wasn't America's first teen idol. That distinction belongs to Rudy Vallée, the singer who, in the 1920s, pioneered the vocal style known as crooning. Before Vallée—in the days before microphones—singers had needed booming voices. The new technology, along with the advent of radio, enabled performers with softer voices to reach millions. Crooning was more intimate, even romantic. And if you were a handsome young man with charisma, teenage girls took notice.

So did a host of other male singers. In 1929, Vallée's lilting delivery of such tunes as "Deep Night" and "I'm Just a Vagabond Lover" created opportunities for a raft of rising pop stars—including Sinatra.

What set Sinatra apart was a potent combination of talent, sex appeal and raw ambition. Born on Dec. 12, 1915, in Hoboken, N.J., the only child of Italian immigrants, Sinatra was a product of his upbringing. His mother, Dolly—feisty and domineering—had a knack for getting her way. His father, Marty, was a boxer turned tavern owner. They raised Frank to believe in the American Dream—that anything was possible with perseverance, hard work and the will to fight for what you wanted. When Sinatra was a teenager, what he wanted most was to be a star: a person who could not only afford life's luxuries, but who was also known and respected beyond the city in which he'd grown up. Not an especially accomplished student or athlete, the boy's talent was singing—something he'd started doing for spare change in his father's saloon.

By the time he died at the age of 82, Sinatra had not only achieved his goals, he had far exceeded them. With more than 150 million records sold, he's one of the bestselling recording artists in history. He also successfully reinvented himself time and again—from crooner to cool cat to actor to icon—and remained a cultural touchstone until the very end of his life, and beyond. Sinatra set the template for all pop stars to follow, from the way he dealt with the inevitable impact of aging to how he changed with the times without losing his identity. Few have done it as well as Sinatra, and almost no one with as much style.

To understand how he accomplished it—and to appreciate how groundbreaking and transformative a figure he truly was—it helps to go back to the beginning: Dec. 30, 1942, the day that jump-started "Sinatramania."

CRUSH ZONE
Sinatra was the center of attention everywhere he went in the 1940s. He was beloved by both male and female fans, but his most ardent supporters were teenage girls in short socks and saddle shoes. The bobby-soxers and their screaming histrionics became almost as much a part of his shows as his crooning.

BIRTH OF THE COOL
After he signed with Capitol Records in 1953, Sinatra (together with conductor Nelson Riddle) put out a series of classic concept albums, including *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* and *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely*, that would define his career. He alternated the records—one bouncy, one bleak—and became legendary for his work in the studio, where his look became an important part of his mystique. Always nattily attired in a suit topped with a trilby hat, he epitomized snappy, graceful fashion.

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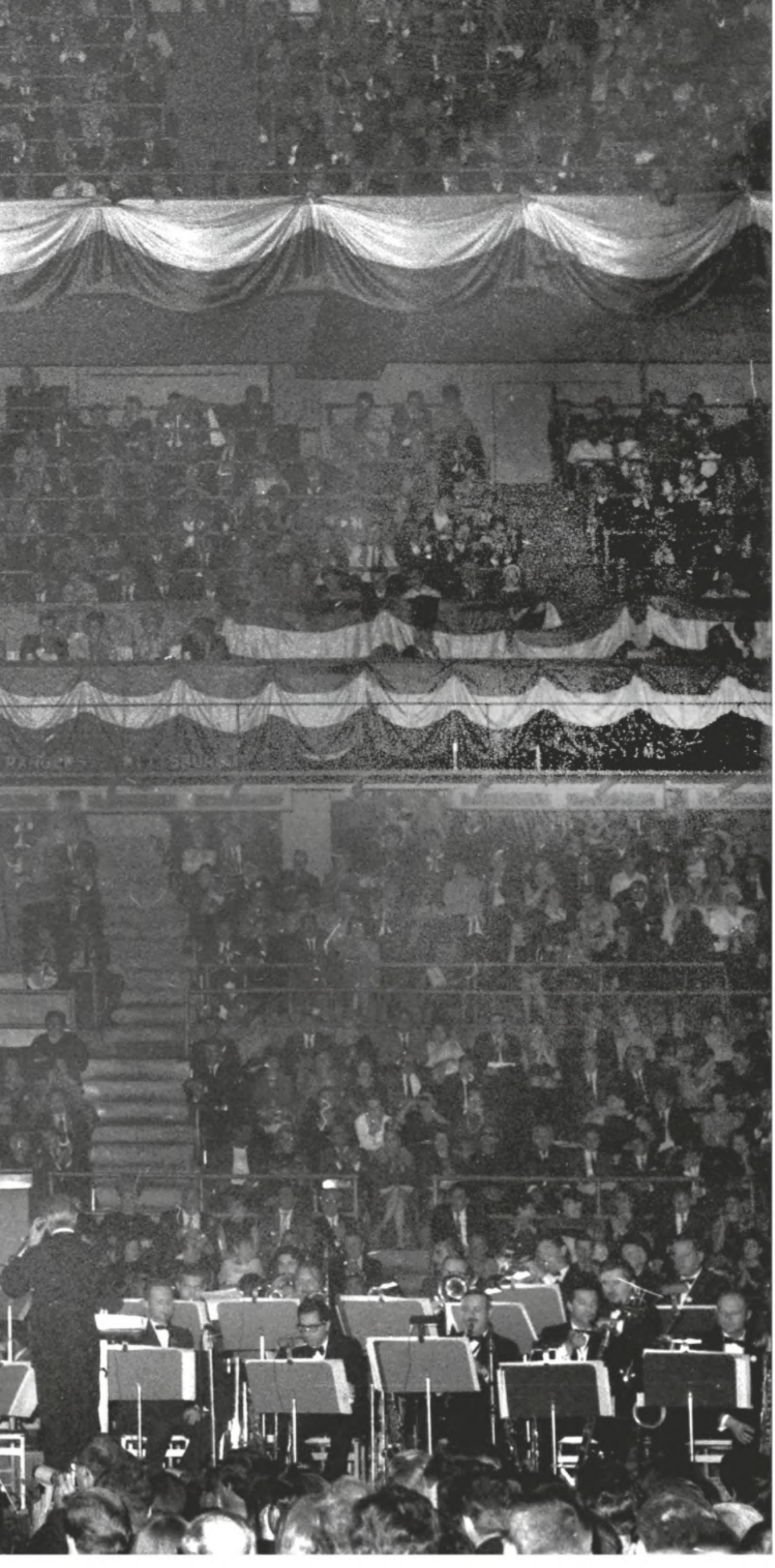
LEADERS OF THE PACK
In the 1950s and ’60s, there were several incarnations of Hollywood’s Rat Pack—the nickname given to a loosely organized collection of entertainers—but the one that remains best known was led by Sinatra. The group had a rolling roster of members (as well as visiting members and “mascots”), but its headliners were Sinatra, Dean Martin (far left) and Sammy Davis Jr. (second from left). Here, the three yuck it up with talk-show host Johnny Carson (near right) in 1965 at a benefit in St. Louis.



MAN IN THE ARENA
One of the most remarkable things about Sinatra's life was the way he kept reinventing himself—from big-band singer to teen idol to serious musician to actor to legend—which not only maintained his popular appeal, but also made him an integral part of popular culture right up until the day he died. He was one of the towering figures of the 20th century in America. Here, he faces the crowd at Madison Square Garden in October 1967 during a rally for the American Italian Anti-Defamation League.

THE MUSIC MAN

In a career spanning 60 years, Sinatra touched on almost every facet of fame—he was an acclaimed singer and movie star, he was a playboy and a tough guy, and, in his later years, he was a celebrity who seemed to be famous just for being famous. But the source of his renown—the core of his status as an icon—was his music. For many, Sinatra's interpretation of a large chunk of the Great American Songbook provided the definitive versions of some of the greatest tunes ever written.

CHAPTER 1

A LEGEND IS BORN

THE LEAN YEARS

For much of the 1930s, Sinatra was just another young crooner looking for a break—he even worked for a time as a singing waiter. Things didn't start to pick up for him until 1939, when he signed with bandleader Harry James.

CHAPTER 1

The future was not looking bright for Frank Sinatra in December 1942. He couldn't find a gig, had burned his relationship with mentor Tommy Dorsey and he worried about supporting his young wife and 2-year-old daughter. Worst of all, if he needed someone to blame for his troubles, all he had to do was stare in the mirror.

The problems had begun in September, when Sinatra left Dorsey and his orchestra. Until that point, Sinatra's big career breaks had come thanks to bandleaders, starting with Harry James. Before joining James' band, Sinatra was just another young singer looking for any chance he could find to make a little money. He earned some attention as part of a small group called the Hoboken Four that won the Major Bowes Amateur Hour talent contest in 1935. But by 1938, Sinatra still needed to work as a singing waiter in suburban New Jersey to help pay his bills.

Things started to look up when he joined forces with James in June 1939. With James' band, Sinatra released his first record—"From the Bottom of My Heart"—just a month later. But by the end of the year, he came to the conclusion that he had more promise than could be fulfilled with Harry James. He thought the band was holding him back. In November 1939, James released Sinatra from his contract so that he could join Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra.

It proved to be a winning move. The Dorsey orchestra had four other rotating singers, but Sinatra rapidly rose to the top of the lineup. Within the first year, Sinatra made more than 40 recordings and had his first hit records, including "I'll Never Smile Again," which sat at No. 1 for 12 weeks in 1940. As his popularity grew, Sinatra—still only 25 years old at the time—started to believe that he was the star attraction more than the rest of the band, or even Dorsey himself.

Sinatra wasn't the first singer to imagine that greater fame, and more money, awaited him as a solo act. Bing Crosby—the star Sinatra both admired and set his sights on surpassing—had successfully made the transition, but many others failed to find work without the support of a big band behind them.

Sinatra didn't believe he'd have a problem for several reasons. He worked extremely hard at perfecting his craft—even applying breathing tricks to singing that he'd learned from Dorsey as he played the trombone. Sinatra also had more vocal range than Bing, and he built up his breath control by running and swimming to increase his power. He also tirelessly polished his enunciation so that his singing voice dropped his New Jersey accent and became virtually flawless. Sinatra also had more sex appeal than other singers from his era. Thin with an angular face and dark, wavy hair, he was comfortable with the attention from women—making him a confident, charismatic flirt.

But would fans turn out to hear Frankie sing without an orchestra? Based on the reactions he'd seen from moon-eyed bobby-soxers in the audience,

SINGLES MINDED
Sinatra began making records with James right away. One of their efforts, "All or Nothing at All," (left) became a hit in 1943, selling more than a million copies.

YOUNG AND HUNGRY
Sinatra was eager to get his career started, because he already had a family to support. Below, he eats breakfast next to his wife and daughter, both named Nancy.

Sinatra had no doubt that they would. The problem was getting out of his contract with Dorsey.

"When I went to leave, Tommy made it impossible," Sinatra later recalled. "I remember that it was in the month of September, in Washington, D.C. I went into the dressing room and told Tommy that I wanted to leave the orchestra, and he kind of smiled. 'What for?' he said. 'You know you are doing great with the band, we got a lot of arrangements for you.' I said 'I understand that but ... just to go out on my own.' He said, 'I don't think so.' I said 'OK, but I'm going to leave.' He said, 'You've got a contract.' I said, 'I had a contract with Harry, but Harry took the contract and tore it up and wished me luck.' And I added, 'I'll give you one year's notice. This time next year I'm leaving.'"

Sinatra was finally able to leave only after Dorsey agreed to a contract buyout of $75,000 (the equivalent of about $1.3 million today). But the negotiations were nasty—Dorsey later implied that he had been coerced into a deal by some of Sinatra's "friends" with ties to organized crime, an allegation that the proud Sinatra always denied and which he took as evidence of the bandleader's racism. Dorsey's parting words to the young singer were, "I hope you fall on your ass!"

For the next two months, it seemed like Tommy Dorsey's wish was going to come true. Sinatra could not find any steady gigs as a solo singer. Two months is a short period considering the long and successful career that was to follow, but living it in real time surrounded by uncertainty was difficult. This was a lonely time to be Frank Sinatra, and loneliness was a feeling that the only child of two working parents knew well. He would channel that emotion into many of his most memorable songs.

The isolation was finally broken by a phone call from Bob Weitman, the talent booker for the Paramount Theater in New York City—a 3,664-seat

BIG BAND BREAK
Sinatra signed with Tommy Dorsey (above, left) and his orchestra in 1939, and within a year had cut about 40 singles, including the hit "I'll Never Smile Again."

CROWD PLEASER
By 1943, after he'd left Dorsey and gone out on his own, Sinatra was the biggest star in the country. At right, he's mobbed by fans at New York's Grand Central Station.

CHAPTER 1

"What did Sinatra sing? No one seems to remember, possibly because it was impossible for anything to be heard."

showcase space in the heart of Times Square.

"What are you doing New Year's Eve?" Weitman asked.

"Not a thing," Sinatra replied quickly.

"I'd like you to open at the joint," offered Weitman.

"You mean on New Year's Eve?"

"That's right."

Technically, the show would be the night before New Year's Eve. And Sinatra was not the headliner but an "extra added attraction" behind the patriotic movie musical *Star Spangled Rhythm*, starring Bing Crosby himself, singer Peggy Lee, the novelty acts Radio Rogues and Moke and Poke, and the Benny Goodman Sextet. But it was Sinatra—rested, hungry and desperate to prove himself—who stole the show.

Goodman was the first to know that something major was happening. He had the seemingly ordinary task of introducing the young singer to the audience. "And now," he said simply, "Frank Sinatra..."

With that cue the teenage girls in the audience cheered, screamed and made the kind of fuss that would later mark the arrival of Elvis and the Beatles. Such unbridled pandemonium was anything but normal in America circa 1942, an era when the country was still cautious, contained and concerned about the Second World War.

"What the hell was that?!" a stunned Goodman famously replied as he walked off stage.

What did Sinatra sing? No one seems to remember, possibly because it was impossible for anything to be heard. "The sound that greeted me," Sinatra later said, "was absolutely deafening. It was a tremendous roar. Five thousand kids, stamping, yelling, screaming, applauding. I was scared stiff. I couldn't move a muscle."

Sinatra's stay at the Paramount was extended week after week, sometimes cramming in six or seven shows a day and more on weekends. With each performance, the number of teens in the audience grew, as did the evidence of their enthusiasm. Some members of the press called the syndrome "Sinatrauma," but a better name was the one that stuck: "Sinatramania."

"I introduced Sinatra and I thought the goddamned building was going to cave in," recalled comedian Jack Benny. "I never heard such a commotion with people running down to the stage, screaming and nearly knocking me off the ramp. All this for a fellow I never heard of."

MARQUEE ATTRACTION
Sinatra wasn't the headliner at the Paramount Theater Dec. 30, 1942—that honor went to Benny Goodman (top, left)—but the young singer stole the show.

GIRL POWER
The core of Sinatramania was made up of young women—also known as bobby-soxers—captivated by the singer's smooth voice and raw-boned sex appeal.

After the Paramount, Sinatra moved his solo show to the struggling Riobamba club for a four-week engagement that extended to 10, single-handedly turning the Riobamba into a profitable enterprise. From there, Sinatra returned to the Paramount in mid-May for a fee of $3,100 a week—a huge jump from the $150 he had accepted to appear less than six months before. When Sinatra played the Paramount in October 1944, he was the biggest singing star in the country and commanded a fee of $25,000 a week.

What was Sinatramania all about? In the estimation of *DownBeat* magazine, "[Sinatra] knows his feminine audience and fires romance—moonlight moods—at them with deadly aim." Articles in *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic* further reasoned that the bobby-soxers' hysteria was all a release of pent-up emotion for girls whose boyfriends were off fighting the war.

There was truth to all of these theories, but none of them gave Sinatra the credit he was due. "People often remark that I'm pretty lucky," he said of his own success. "Luck is only important in so far as getting the chance to sell yourself at the right moment. After that, you've got to have talent and know how to use it."

In the decades to follow, Sinatra would prove over and over that his performing legacy was built on so much more than a series of lucky breaks.

CHAPTER 2

1940s

POPULAR VOTE
At the height of his early fame, Sinatra lent his celebrity to a political cause, speaking and singing at a campaign rally for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1944.

MIKE GROOVES
In mid-August 1943, Sinatra crooned for 10,000 fans at the Hollywood Bowl. By this time, he had mastered the use of a microphone, which he called his “instrument.”

To witness Frank Sinatra perform in the 1940s was to be present for the Big Bang of pop. Young Sinatra, more than any performer before him, wasn't just a singer: He was a phenomenon.

The foundation for what Sinatra brought to modern music started with his ability to uniquely interpret a song. Fans and casual observers summarized this by nicknaming him "The Voice," but there was more nuance and work involved than simply opening his mouth and making a sound.

Sinatra considered singing to be a craft, and one that he took very seriously. A key to his success was his ability to use the microphone. Sinatra respected this piece of technology—patented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876—as the "instrument" that he played to make music.

"The first rule is to use it with great economy," he is quoted as explaining in Charles L. Granata's book *Sessions With Sinatra*. "You don't crowd it—you must never jar an audience with it. ... You must know when to move away from the mike, and when to move back into it. To me, there's no worse sound than when a singer breathes in sharply, and you hear the gasp over the microphone. The whole secret is getting the air in the corner of your mouth and using the microphone properly."

Sinatra's skills with a microphone were so practiced and advanced that handling the device was part of his performance. Unlike many early singers, Sinatra was comfortable with a mike in his hands. "Singers in the old days used to sing deadpan," said longtime Sinatra friend Sammy Davis Jr. "They'd keep their hands in their pockets and stand up there flat-footed and sing. ... But Frank used to do things with his hands and convey the song both lyrically and physically to the audience."

Another key to Sinatra's success was his innate ability to establish a connection with the crowd. Sinatra always called himself "a saloon singer"—the kind of person who you'd see up close and feel comfortable talking with casually when a set was finished. This dates back to his childhood, when he

VOICE AGITATED
On Oct. 12, 1944, thousands of Sinatra fans waited to get tickets for his show at the Paramount Theatre in Times Square. This was the start of the Columbus Day Riot.

MOVIE READY
Sinatra croons next to bandleader Tommy Dorsey (below right, with trombone) in the 1942 musical *Ship Ahoy*. It was just the singer's second film appearance.

used to stand by the piano in his father's tavern and sing songs for loose change: Sinatra understood what it meant to make people feel a closeness and intimacy with him when he performed. His shows at the Paramount demonstrated the power of this connection. Even in the recording studio, Sinatra treated his sessions like a live performance at a nightclub. He'd usually dress up and stand in front of the orchestra without wearing headphones. He didn't like to rely on editing, preferring to record (and re-record) a song straight through until it met his satisfaction—all of which helped Sinatra reach listeners in a sincere and heartfelt way, no matter whether they were right in front of him or playing his records at home. "I get an audience personally involved in a song—because I'm involved myself," he said. "It's not something I do deliberately: I can't help myself."

Finally, Sinatra was a master at choosing material. He did not write his own songs, and he was often not even the first person to perform what he sang. But he put great thought into selecting compositions that meant something to him, looking for opportunities to insert his own feelings or experiences into a song so that—like a jazz performer—his interpretation was unique and memorable.

"I saw complete and utter involvement with the songs he was singing; involvement so close that one might feel he was in the throes of composing both tune and lyrics as he went along," observed writer Robin Douglas-Home in his book *Sinatra*.

Taken as a complete body of work, Sinatra's songbook from the 1940s represented an enormous leap forward for American popular music. He transformed familiar songs—both old and new—into something completely his own. The result was that the singer was now in the spotlight, having as much importance as the song itself. Sinatra was a famously outspoken critic of rock music, yet he also blazed the very trail that all rock stars would soon follow—the blueprint for becoming a modern musical superstar.

The first "Sinatra song" to command the public's attention was "I'll Never Smile Again" (Victor, 1940), recorded and released when Frank was still associated with Tommy Dorsey. Written in 1939 by a Canadian songwriter named Ruth Lowe after her husband had died during surgery, the tune had a message that had been softened to be more universal, about a breakup rather than an untimely death. Dorsey believed the song was perfect for his young singing star, and he was right—it topped the charts for 12 weeks in 1940 and was Sinatra's first hit record. After America entered World War II in 1941, the song gained added resonance for countless young women whose boyfriends or husbands had left home to fight for their country. Sinatra himself was spared military service after being declared 4F (not acceptable for the armed forces) due to a pierced eardrum, but he always acknowledged that his early popularity had been partially driven by his role as a stand-in love interest for many young fans. "Perfectly simple," he said of his effect on teen girls. "It was the war years and there was a great loneliness, and I was the boy in every corner drugstore, the boy who'd gone off drafted to the war. That's all."

Another early release for Sinatra was "Stardust" (Victor, 1940). A staple of the Great American Songbook, it had been written in 1927 by Hoagy Carmichael, with lyrics by Mitchell Parish. The song was notable in Sinatra's personal history as it was the first number he sang with Harry James. "Harry came out and introduced him as the new singer with the band," recalled trumpeter Jack Arnold in the book *Sessions With Sinatra*. "He said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, this is our new vocalist, and we don't have any arrangements for him as yet. Frank, do you think we can scare something up for you to sing?' Sinatra called out 'Stardust,' which is not the easiest song to sing. ..."

With that, Sinatra was on his way. And although his time with Harry James' band was short, it did

MORALE SUPPORT
A pierced eardrum kept Sinatra out of World War II, but not from doing his part. In 1943, he and Harry James performed for troops at the Hollywood Canteen (above).

RISEN STAR
Sinatra—seen here upon his arrival in L.A. in 1943—dominated pop culture in the early 1940s, bolstered by a string of hit songs and a legion of fanatical admirers.

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

POINTING THE WAY
Sinatra idolized Bing Crosby (above, left), who'd blazed the trail Sinatra would follow a decade later. Above, he rides piggyback with Crosby and Bob Hope (center).

TABLE MANNERS
Sinatra spoon-feeds daughter Nancy at lunch in 1945 while filming *Anchors Aweigh*, with co-stars Gene Kelly and Pamela Britton (right, center).

produce Sinatra's first release as a solo performer—a recording he'd made with the group in 1939 of "All or Nothing at All" (Columbia, 1943). The song had been composed by Arthur Altman, with lyrics by Jack Lawrence, and the earlier recording was chosen as Sinatra's solo debut in 1943 to compensate for a musicians' strike that lasted from 1942 to 1944. The record topped the Billboard charts for 21 weeks and sold more than a million copies, cementing Sinatra's status as one of the few early singers able to stand on his own without support from a big band.

Among Sinatra's first solo releases was "You'll Never Know" (Columbia, 1943). With music written by Harry Warren and lyrics by Mack Gordon, the song had been adapted from a poem written by a war bride from Oklahoma named Dorothy Fern Norris. Sinatra's version, recorded during the musicians' strike, featured vocal accompaniment by the Bobby Tucker Singers. Another hit right out of the gate, it stayed at No. 2 for two weeks and remained on the charts for 16.

Sinatra's earliest hits showcased his specialty: conjuring romance—but with a twist of melancholy that perfectly reflected the war years. His ability to project loneliness while singing about love would be a hallmark of his work for the rest of his life.

By 1944, Sinatra was one of the biggest stars in the world. To build on his popularity, he began acting in Hollywood films, an addition to his career that was not entirely to his liking. Movie-making lacked the spontaneity and connection that Sinatra was able to bring to his singing. He didn't mind recording take after take of a song to get it right, but when it came to acting he often felt that his first take was his best—an opinion that was not always shared by directors.

Sinatra continued releasing records while he made movies, and 1944 yielded two recordings that are now considered classics—"I'll Be Seeing You" (Victor, 1944) and "White Christmas" (Columbia, 1944). Both were also hits for friendly rival Bing Crosby. Sinatra idolized Crosby, who'd broken through as a star almost a decade before. It was said that a teen-age Frank even had a picture of Bing on his bedroom wall. Crosby respected Sinatra's talents immensely, but did acknowledge that the young crooner's rise to prominence had impacted his own career. "Frank is a singer who comes along once in a lifetime, but why did he have to come in mine," Crosby famously said.

Sinatra transformed familiar songs—both old and new—into something completely his own.

In 1945, Sinatra was cast with Gene Kelly in the MGM movie musical *Anchors Aweigh*. The film was a huge success, earning Sinatra an Academy Award nomination for the song "I Fall in Love Too Easily." Sinatra and Kelly would team up twice more before the end of the decade—in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* and *On the Town*, both released in 1949.

To facilitate his film career, Sinatra moved from New Jersey to Hollywood. His wife, Nancy, and two small children, Nancy and Frank Jr., moved out West as well. But their presence did nothing to stop Sinatra from engaging in affairs that quickly became public embarrassments for both him and his family. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that two of his most notable recordings of this era revealed a glimpse of his personal struggles.

"Nancy (With the Laughing Face)" (Columbia, 1944) was originally written in 1942 by Jimmy Van Heusen and lyricist Johnny Burke, with help from comedian Phil Silvers, as "Bessie (With the Laughing Face)," for a birthday party honoring Burke's wife. The song went over so well that the trio began adapting the tune at parties for other females celebrating birthdays, including one for little Nancy Sinatra. Not knowing the song's history, Frank became emotional the first time he heard it. "Frank broke down and cried, thinking it had been written especially for his daughter," revealed Rick Busciglio, a music historian

CHAPTER 2

A PATRIOT'S PRIDE
In the 1945 short "The House I Live In" (above), Sinatra spoke up for tolerance and against prejudice. As a child of Italian immigrants, he was extremely proud of the film.

STAR SAILOR
Sinatra ended the 1940s by appearing in the musical *On the Town*, with Kelly (right) and Jules Munshin (left). It was a hit, but Sinatra's fame had started to slide.

who heard the story from Jimmy Van Heusen himself. "Jimmy assigned his royalties to Nancy after Frank recorded it for Columbia in 1944."

"Saturday Night (Is the Loneliest Night of the Week)" (Columbia, 1945) was written by Jule Styne, with lyrics by Sammy Cahn. Taken at face value, the song might appear to reflect another lonesome tale of America during World War II, but it was really about the isolation felt by show business people when they didn't have a gig to distract them. Sinatra would find himself increasingly in this exact situation as the 1940s wound to a close. Now entering his 30s, Sinatra veered away from his "boy next door" image and started to become more outspoken about his very adult opinions and beliefs.

All of these facets of Sinatra's life and career came together in "The House I Live In," a short film released in 1945 as a stance against anti-Semitism in America. As a first-generation Italian-American, Sinatra understood what it was like to be the target of racial prejudice. He believed that it was his duty as an American and role model to take a stand and defend the country as a place where everyone could be treated equally and with respect, regardless of their heritage or religious beliefs. The 10-minute film received an honorary Academy Award and the title song, with music by Earl Robinson and lyrics by Abel Meeropol, became a national hit.

"The House I Live In" was a source of great pride for Sinatra, a culmination of the influence that he had worked so hard to achieve. But while the 1940s had begun with his rapid rise to stardom and the fulfillment of his lifelong dreams, the back half of the decade was not as prosperous. By the end of 1948, Sinatra ranked not first, or even second, but fourth in *DownBeat* magazine's yearly poll of America's most popular singers. Sinatra was still a cultural phenomenon and a pioneering singer, but his life and career had reached an important crossroads.

CHAPTER 3

1950s

HIGH NOTE
After Sinatra signed with Capitol Records in 1953, he produced the greatest music of his career—and some of the greatest albums and songs of all time.

CHAPTER 3

In the fall of 1949, Frank Sinatra jump-started the ’50s with a literal bang after attending a party hosted by Darryl Zanuck, the head of 20th Century Fox. Sinatra was under contract with rival studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, neatly settled as a star of light musical comedies that, both creatively and practically, he was becoming too old for.

At the same time, Sinatra also appeared to be outgrowing his marriage. He and Nancy had first become a couple back in New Jersey, when he was 19 and she was 17. The mother of his three children, Nancy was absolutely devoted to Frank, even forgiving his indiscretions as his fame grew.

But their bond was severely tested ever since the family had moved to California. In Hollywood, surrounded by starlets and temptation, Sinatra’s extramarital affairs played out in front of both his family and the public. Unable to stop his cheating, he eventually gave up trying. It was against this backdrop that Sinatra—young, famous and a shameless flirt—appeared to meet his equal in starlet Ava Gardner.

According to Lee Server’s biography *Ava Gardner: Love Is Nothing*, both Frank and Ava were in attendance at Zanuck’s party where a very drunk Sinatra convinced an equally drunk Gardner to leave with him. Tearing out of Palm Springs in Sinatra’s Cadillac, the pair reached the town of Indio, where they stopped to make out. Afterwards, Sinatra pulled out two guns and both Frank and Ava began shooting, damaging streetlights and a store window in the small, sleeping town. They were taken into custody by local police, and eventually released thanks to the efforts of press agent Jack Keller, who grabbed a suitcase, filled it with cash, and chartered a plane from Burbank to Indio to “fix” the situation.

When Gardner arrived home the next morning, she encountered her sister. As Server described the scene: “Ava told her she had been out with Frank Sinatra and they had had a wonderful time.”

This began a steamy, wild affair between the two headstrong strivers. But unlike his wife, Nancy, who took great pride in being Frank’s complementary

TEAM OF RIVALS
Sinatra began the 1950s by leaving his wife—in messy, public fashion—for actress Ava Gardner (below). Early in their relationship, she was the bigger star.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE
Sinatra was smitten with Gardner (below, at their 1951 wedding), but their union was stormy. She ran hot and cold, and he seemed bent on ruining his career for her.

RELAX, FRANKIE
Sinatra chain-smokes while visiting Gardner in Spain, where she was filming *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*—and also having an affair with her co-star.

domestic partner, Gardner worked in the same industry and had the ambition and ego of a professional rival.

At first, the dynamic worked. Sinatra was passionately—and lustfully—in love. His marriage, his young children, the scandalous incident in Indio, none of it stopped Sinatra from pursuing the dark-haired beauty who already had a reputation for reducing famous and powerful men to love-sick pups.

For a time, it even seemed that Sinatra was willing to sacrifice his career to win Gardner over. "All of my life, being a singer was the most important thing in the world," he reportedly told her. "Now you're all I want." Perhaps coincidentally, Frank left MGM in 1950—it was reported at the time that Sinatra had asked to be released from his contract, but later stories left open the possibility that he'd been fired.

Then, in 1952, Columbia informed Sinatra that it would not be renewing his record contract due to poor sales. Had his commercial appeal really fallen so dramatically? Perhaps. The war years were over and the bobby-soxers had grown up, but it was still shocking for anyone—most of all Frank himself—to believe that his talent wasn't enough for him to remain viable. There was also evidence that other factors may have played a role in making Sinatra a performer no longer worth the effort to support.

For starters, there was his image and reputation. The old saying that all press is good press did not apply to Frank Sinatra. The stories written about him in the early 1950s focused on his failing marriage, his home-wrecking affair with Gardner and lingering questions about his relationships with Italian mobsters. It is fair to conclude that this negative publicity played at least some role in convincing both MGM and Columbia that being in the Frank Sinatra business was more trouble than it was worth.

Nancy finally gave Frank what he wanted—a divorce—in October 1951, clearing the way for a November wedding to Ava Gardner. But life with his second wife was far from domestic bliss. The

tempestuous Gardner had always run hot and cold as far as her feelings. This drove Sinatra out of his mind, but also made him want her all the more. And, as his career started to unravel, it was clear Gardner was the bigger star in the family—a reality that only compounded Sinatra's doubts and insecurities.

"There was a time when I was the hottest thing in the country," he later confided to comedian and friend Tom Dreesen. "I could pick up the phone and any major recording company would take my call. I could call any agency ... they would take my call. I could call the president of the United States and he would take my call. Then I got cold. And for three years, I was really cold."

Sinatra turned his fortunes around with his performance in *From Here to Eternity* in 1953. Gardner reportedly had to pull strings just to get Sinatra an audition, and after landing the part of Maggio he earned only $8,000 and was listed third on the bill in a supporting role. But as a sympathetic soldier bullied and beaten by a menacing stockade sergeant played by Ernest Borgnine, Sinatra not only walked away with the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, he gained new confidence that maybe he could stage a career comeback.

Musically, his rebound would happen under a new label: Capitol Records. His first project for his new studio was the album *Songs for Young Lovers*, recorded in 1953. Establishing a new style and a new template for all his future recordings over the next 20 years, Sinatra left behind the boyish charms that had first made him a sensation and assumed a rougher, jazzy style that sounded like what he really was—an aging, wounded man who had taken some beatings in life without losing the will to keep fighting.

With the musical accompaniment of an orchestra conducted by Nelson Riddle, three tracks were destined for classic status—"My Funny Valentine" by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, "I Get a Kick Out

FIRST-CLASS PRIVATE
In 1953, Sinatra rejuvenated his career playing unlucky Pvt. Angelo Maggio in the hit film *From Here to Eternity*, which was a critical and commercial success.

TWO FOR THE ROAD
At the 1954 Academy Awards, Sinatra and *Eternity* co-star Donna Reed (second from left) both won Oscars for supporting roles. Their movie also won Best Picture.

Sinatra was more than motivated when he joined Capitol, and the result was the best work of his career.

GENIUS AT WORK
Released one month before Sinatra won his Oscar, *Songs for Young Lovers*—his first album for Capitol—was a classic. Above, Sinatra on the job in the recording studio.

SWEET MUSIC
Sinatra's songs at Capitol were brilliantly arranged by composer Nelson Riddle (near right, along with, from left, Sinatra, pianist Bill Miller and Ella Fitzgerald in 1958).

of You" by Cole Porter, and "They Can't Take That Away From Me" by George and Ira Gershwin.

Sinatra was more than motivated when he joined Capitol, and the result was the best work of his career. "Virtually every song the singer recorded at Capitol is a model of perfection," assessed Charles S. Granata in his book *Sessions With Sinatra*. "Both *Young Lovers* (1953) and *Swing Easy* (1954) were created with the intimacy of small group settings in mind: the former featuring the Hollywood String Quartet plus rhythm and two saxophones performing arrangements by George Siravo; the latter a stringless 14-piece brass-and-wind band interpreting new Riddle charts. Each exemplified the fresh sound that was fast becoming associated with the 'new' Sinatra; the choice of songs was superb, the arrangements sublime."

In between the release of *Young Lovers* and *Swing Easy*, Capitol and Sinatra combined to produce the hit single "Young at Heart" (Capitol, 1954). That release peaked at No. 2 on the charts. A month later, Sinatra released another single—"Three Coins in the Fountain"—that reached No. 4.

Swing Easy consisted of only eight tracks, but contributed another three Sinatra classics—"Just One of Those Things" by Cole Porter, "Get Happy" by Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen, and "All of Me" by Gerald Marks and Seymour Simons. The album earned recognition as *Billboard*'s Album of the Year and Sinatra was honored as Favorite Male Vocalist by three magazines: *Billboard*, *Metronome* and *DownBeat*.

The hot streak continued with *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955), the title track of which was written by Dave Mann and Bob Hilliard with the lengthy title "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning." As Mann recalled in *Sessions With Sinatra*: "Bob and I had written the song and happened to be in New York en route to visit a publisher. As we were walking along the street, Bob said, 'Hey, there's Sinatra and Nelson Riddle.' Sure enough, they were walking ahead of us, so we called out to them, and showed them the song. Frank liked it, and asked, 'Is this published yet? We'll use it on the album we're doing right now.'"

In 1956, Sinatra made history by becoming the first artist to record an album at Capitol's newly opened—and soon to become iconic—Hollywood headquarters (aka The Tower). This release was the instrumental *Frank Sinatra Conducts Tone Poems of*

Color. That same year, Sinatra also recorded vocals in the studio, including peak versions of "Night and Day" and "The Lady Is a Tramp."

After starting the new decade on such a down note, Sinatra was back on top. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, yet another challenge presented itself in the form of a guitar-playing, hip-swiveling singer from the south named Elvis Presley. Almost everything about Presley's meteoric climb into the national spotlight had to seem familiar to Sinatra—a young, good-looking singer with boyish charms who appealed to screaming teenage girls, it was New Year's at the Paramount all over again. But unlike the rival crooners that Sinatra had successfully outpaced when he was the hottest teen idol, there was something different about Presley and the music he made—something that Sinatra could not compete with because he didn't consider it to be music at all.

That "something different" was called rock 'n' roll. Elvis' appeal was not based on practiced breath control, enunciation, orchestral charts or any of the things that Sinatra had spent almost two decades working to perfect. Elvis was a sensation because his music captured something powerful and raw that was more sex than love, more feeling than technique—and it was a force that appealed not to the

bobby-soxers who had swooned for Frank during World War II, but to their teenage children—kids who'd been born after the war had ended.

Never one to give up without a fight, Sinatra stood toe-to-toe with Elvis and the various rockers who followed him. Playing to different audiences, and clinging to the possibility that rock was a fad destined to fizzle, Sinatra's 1957 release of *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely* was another triumph, lingering 120 weeks on the Billboard albums chart and peaking at No. 1. A notable highlight from the album featured the self-proclaimed "saloon singer" living up to the reputation with "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)" by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer. Undoubtedly channeling the emotion of his dying relationship with Ava Gardner, which ended in divorce on July 5, 1957, Sinatra's performance practically drips with whisky, tears and regret.

But, as the decade drew to a close, Sinatra could not escape the one advantage that Elvis and countless rockers to follow had over him in the battle for popular dominance: youth. Sinatra spent the last five years of the 1950s on the other side of 40—a milestone that was a lot older then than it is today.

Sinatra turned out pristine classics for Capitol from 1955 through 1959, including "Love and Marriage," "Learnin' the Blues," "I've Got You Under My Skin," "All the Way," "Come Fly With Me" and "High Hopes." But despite the label's efforts to categorize this music—Sinatra's music—as "swinging," the music industry wanted to shove Sinatra into a different category: something they called "Easy Listening."

This was a mistake. There was nothing easy about Frank Sinatra or his music. By the dawn of the 1960s, Sinatra understood that he could not stop the passage of time. But he could redefine what it meant to be a man of a certain age—someone not old enough to retire but still young enough to have wicked, naughty fun. That's how Sinatra lived his life, and in so doing he established himself as a role model once again.

LOOKING THE PART
Sinatra was never more like a saloon singer than when he crooned "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)" in 1955's *Young at Heart* (below, left).

DUELING IDOLS
As part of a 1960 ABC special welcoming Elvis home from the Army, the King sang a duet with The Voice, who could see that the times were changing.

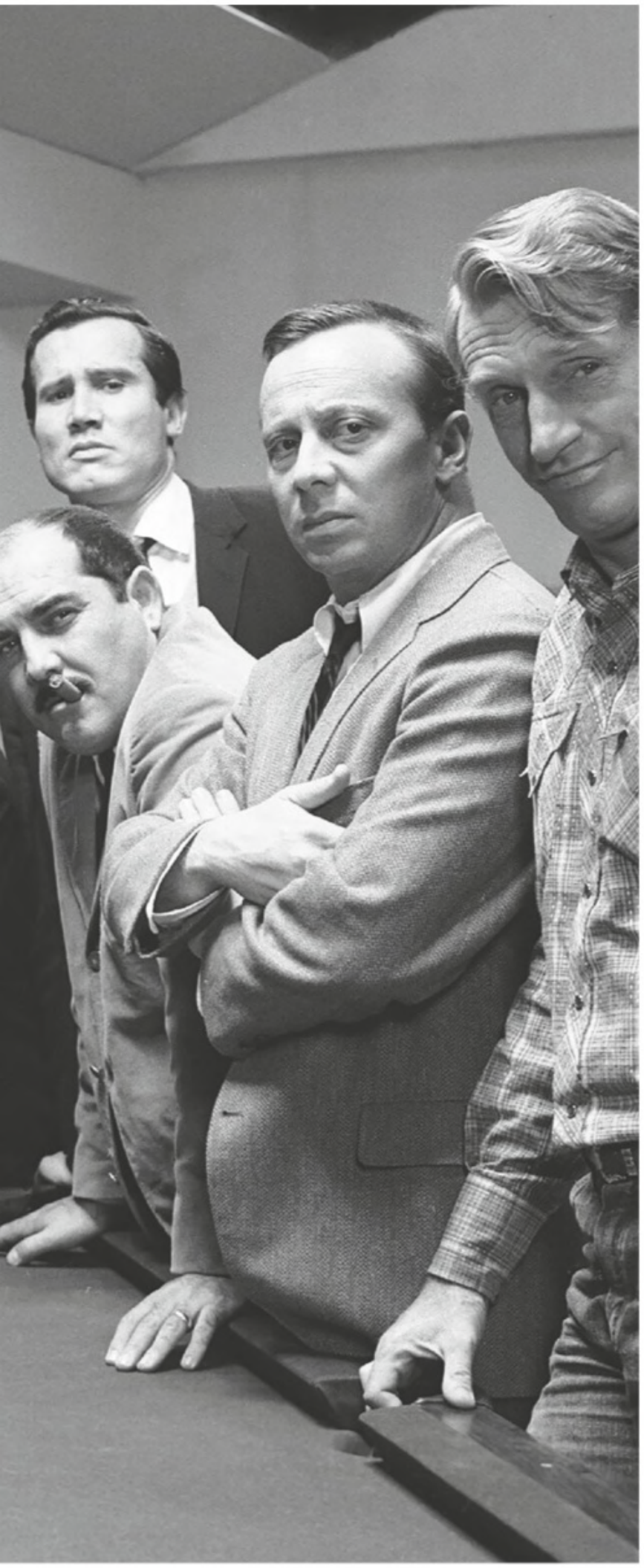
CHAPTER 4

1960s

TOP OF THE HEAP
Sinatra began the decade living a life that was the envy of every man in America, and he ended it—after starting his own record label—still churning out hit music.

GOOD-TIME GANG
Sinatra (below, fifth from right) with the hard-partying cast of *Ocean's 11*. To his right and left are fellow Rat Packers Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin.

POLITICAL VOICE
Four months before he was elected president, John F. Kennedy dined with Sinatra at a Democratic Committee dinner at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles.



In January 1960, Frank Sinatra—along with some of his closest friends—began to enjoy a deal too good to pass up: Hang out in Las Vegas for a couple of months, sleep all morning, do a little bit of work in the afternoon to fund the fun, then drink and gamble and ham it up with high rollers all night. Sinatra's playmates included Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop, a group that Frank called "the Summit" before popular culture gave them a different nickname: the Rat Pack.

The "work" was filming the movie *Ocean's 11*, the story of a bunch of smooth, lovable rogues—all World War II vets—planning the heist of five casinos on New Year's Eve. The film itself, light drive-in fare at best, was less noteworthy than the show that Frank and his gang staged while making it: a seemingly endless display of party stamina that turned Las Vegas into the place to be seen and Sinatra into the King of Cool.

Officially a bachelor after his painful breakup with Ava Gardner, Sinatra was not unattached during the early '60s—he had relationships with Lauren Bacall, Juliet Prowse, Angie Dickinson and even Marilyn Monroe before eventually marrying Mia Farrow in 1966—but he was free to spend his time however he chose, without guilt, and live while the living was good. A fit and trim 44 years old when filming began, Sinatra could drink and smoke anyone under the table and still look great wearing a tuxedo the next day. If this was what a midlife crisis looked like, millions of American men wanted to live the same way.

RING-A-DING-DINO!
Few knew how to have a good time as well as the Rat Pack, Sinatra's informal club of showbiz pals. Below, he pours out a whiskey with Martin (left) and Davis (center).

SWINGIN' PLAYBOY
Actress Lauren Bacall (near right) was among the many stars and starlets that Sinatra squired around Hollywood after his 1957 divorce from Ava Gardner.

It was all a fairy tale, of course. Very few people other than Sinatra could spend hours in a sauna sweating out toxins or hire the various handlers and fixers who could make troubles magically disappear. But America in 1960 was game for a good fairy tale. The sacrifices of the war years were over, a sense of prosperity was in the air, and even the newly elected president (whom Sinatra had openly supported with a custom-made version of "High Hopes")—John F. Kennedy—was seen as a man who would make the hit Broadway musical *Camelot* spring to life in the United States.

Sinatra's personal version of Camelot—a plentiful place of happiness, nobility and style—was a movable feast that traveled with him wherever he wanted to roam. Sometimes it was Palm Springs. Frequently it was Vegas. Whatever the location, you could always count on a high-ball glass that never emptied and enough sunshine to give you the perfect tan. This was what it was like living, Sinatra style, in the 1960s.

Musically, the first year of the new decade provided fans with *Nice 'n' Easy,* released in July 1960 on the Capitol label. With arrangements by Nelson Riddle, the collection of 12 ballads was highlighted by two numbers from George and Ira Gershwin—"I've Got a Crush on You" and "Embraceable You"—and the title track, written by Alan Bergman, Marilyn Keith and Lew Spence.

Nice 'n' Easy was another smash, staying at No. 1 on the Billboard stereo album chart for nine weeks. But, behind the scenes, Sinatra was growing increasingly frustrated with Capitol, the label that had salvaged his singing career.

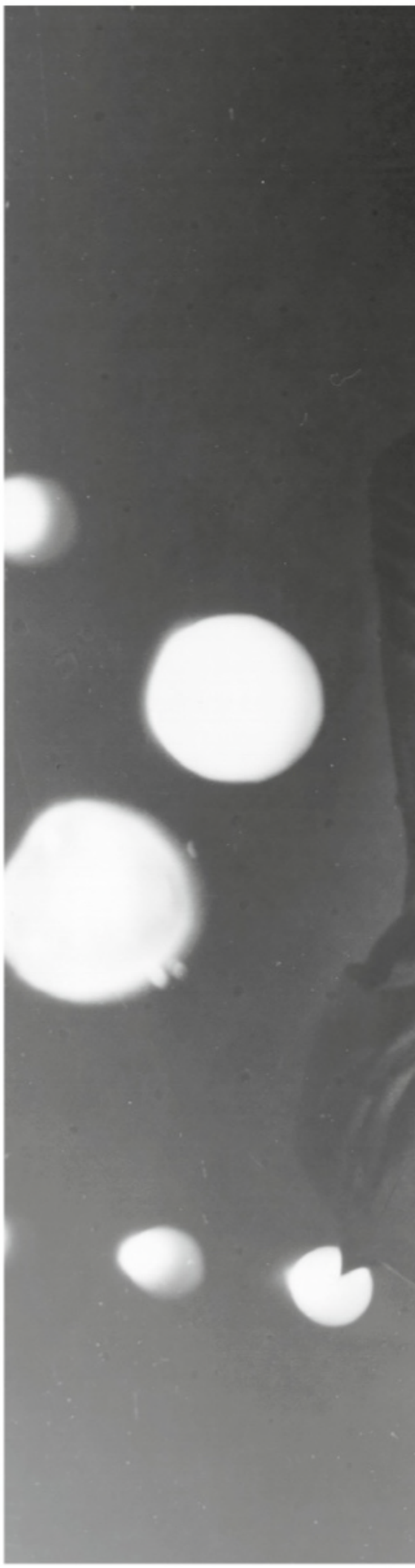
"He had felt the label was focusing more on the marketing and less on the creative aspects of making records," explains author Charles S. Granata in *Sessions With Sinatra.* "The executives controlled every move he made. The adventurer in him found this stifling. Using his stature as one of the label's most profitable artists as leverage, he requested that

Capitol create an imprint label for him: He would control it creatively, and they would promote it through their powerful distribution system. His suggestion fell on deaf ears."

For six months, the relationship between Sinatra and Capitol was tense. Ever the professional, Sinatra recorded an entire album for the label despite harboring hard feelings—a notable achievement since nobody held a grudge like Frank, who was notorious for his short fuse and violent temper when he felt he had been wronged. The album, 1961's *Sinatra's Swingin' Session!!!*, lived up to the three exclamation points in the title as the singer instructed Nelson Riddle to push the tempo—possibly because he wanted to be in and out of Capitol's famed Studio A as quickly as possible. The album crammed 12 songs into 26 minutes and 23 seconds. The two longest tracks were two of the best—"September in the Rain" by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, and Sinatra's take of "Blue Moon" by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Both clocked in at over 2:50. Meanwhile, songs like "You Do Something to Me" by Cole Porter and "Should I?" by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown flew by at around 1:30. Swingin', indeed.

The standoff was ultimately resolved when Sinatra agreed to record two albums and a single for Capitol, while also having the freedom to record and release albums under his own imprint, effective immediately. Sinatra named his label Reprise, which in musical terms referred to a repeat of a central theme. In this case, it meant that the songs Sinatra chose to issue on his own label would be music to return to again and again.

Sinatra's first single for Reprise featured two numbers written by Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen: "The Second Time Around" and "Tina." The latter song, like "Nancy (with the Laughing Face)," was Sinatra's tribute to his daughter—in this case, his youngest child.



DADDY'S GIRL
One of the first songs that Sinatra put out under the new Reprise label was "Tina," which he recorded as a tribute to his youngest daughter (above, right).

START COUNTING
After Sinatra founded Reprise Records, he had the freedom to collaborate with a variety of artists, including pianist and composer Count Basie (far right).

CHAPTER 4

Sinatra had his freedom, but Capitol had muscle. The label flooded the market with its deep catalog of Sinatra recordings—essentially forcing Frank (the record-label owner) to compete with Frank (the popular singer) for a share of his fans' attention.

Sinatra landed on his feet by partnering with Warner Bros. in 1963—the deal made Reprise part of the Warner family, complete with a seat on the Board of Directors for Frank and a sizable influx of cash. Highlights from Sinatra's Reprise releases of the '60s include recordings of "As Time Goes By" (1961), "Fly Me to the Moon" (1964), "The Way You Look Tonight" (1964) and "Strangers in the Night" (1966).

Sinatra no longer had access to the pristine recording environment of Capitol's Studio A, but he gained the artistic freedom to explore working with a new group of talented musical creators, including Count Basie and Quincy Jones. This added a new chapter to Sinatra's legacy as an iconic performer—and new ways to express himself as he continued to mature, in some ways mellow, and take on new perspectives that he wanted to share with listeners.

The ultimate manifestation of where Sinatra was as a performer—and man—circa 1966 was his recording of "That's Life," written by Dean Kay and Kelly Gordon. With lyrics like "That's life/That's

"If this was what a midlife crisis looked like, millions of American men wanted to live the same way."

what all the people say/You're riding high in April, shot down in May/But I know I'm gonna change that tune/When I'm back on top, back on top in June," the story being told is Sinatra's own.

Reportedly, Sinatra first heard the song as interpreted by R&B singer O.C. Smith in 1966. Sinatra called his daughter Nancy—who was now a pop singer herself—and asked her to track down the publisher because he wanted to record his own version.

Working with producer Jimmy Bowen, Sinatra was backed by the ace studio musicians (including Glenn Campbell) who comprised L.A.'s famed Wrecking Crew. This same outfit was the secret ingredient that had helped producer Phil Spector, the Beach Boys, and many others crank out rock and pop hits. Sinatra probably didn't realize it, but he was partnering with the backbone of the music he openly hated.

In the studio, Sinatra felt he nailed "That's Life" in his first take, which ended with Sinatra singing, "Oh, yeah," as the punctuating fade out.

"Frank said to me, 'That's your hit, isn't it?'," recalled Bowen in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "I said, 'Well, no ... if you want a hit, you're going to have to do it one more time'.... And everybody got real quiet, and he gave me the coldest look an artist ever gave me. But he went right out, and instead of singing it hip, he was pissed.... So he bit it.... He got to the end, and that's when he put in that, 'My, my!'.... It was me he was directing it to—you know, 'I'll show ya!'"

Sinatra would take great offense to being compared to any rock singer, but he did have something in common with performers of America's new contemporary song book: defiance. On a Billboard Hot 100 chart filled by rock in 1966, Sinatra's version of "That's Life" climbed to No. 4.

Sinatra's version of the song would later be covered by artists ranging from Aretha Franklin to James Brown to Van Morrison to David Lee Roth. Furthermore, Reprise—the label Sinatra had founded to establish his own creative freedom—would also

TALKING SINGING
In 1965, on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Sinatra looked back on his career in the one-hour NBC television special *Frank Sinatra: A Man and His Music*.

STUDIO TIME
Even after his move from Capitol, Sinatra remained the consummate craftsman. Above, he puts in work with oldest daughter Nancy, a pop star in her own right.

FRANK'S WAY
Sinatra released "My Way" in 1969. He never cared for it, but the song was a hit with fans. Contrary to the lyrics, the end wasn't really near—though he didn't know it.

evolve through the '60s, becoming home to such artists as Neil Young, Joni Mitchell and Jimi Hendrix.

Frank Sinatra's 1960s began as a Rat Pack romp. It ended with him, at age 54, pondering the final chapters of his career and how he wanted to use his remaining time as an artist to punctuate his legacy.

On Nov. 5, 1969, the TV special *Sinatra: Featuring Don Costa and His Orchestra* aired on CBS. The show was partly a nostalgic look back, as well as a reflection on the present day, complete with a salute to the Apollo astronauts who had recently completed their mission to the moon. Sinatra also performed one of his recent releases: "My Way."

The story of "My Way" can be traced back to the south of France sometime around 1968. There, American pop singer Paul Anka heard a tune called "Comme d'habitude" (or "As Usual") by Jacques Revaux and Claude Francois. Anka flew to Paris to secure rights to adapt the song in the U.S., reportedly for $1 plus a share of royalties. After flying home, Anka had dinner with Sinatra who told him offhandedly, "I'm quitting the business. I'm sick of it; I'm getting the hell out."

Still, Anka kept Sinatra in mind as he wrote American lyrics to "Comme d'habitude." As Anka recalled: "At one o'clock in the morning, I sat down

at an old IBM electric typewriter and said, 'If Frank were writing this, what would he say?' And I started, metaphorically, 'And now the end is near'.... I used words I would never use: 'I ate it up and spit it out.' But that's the way he talked. I used to be around steam rooms with the Rat Pack guys. ..."

When Anka finished the song, he called Sinatra to tell him "I've got something really special for you."

Sinatra recorded "My Way" in a single take on Dec. 30, 1968. It was released early the following year and reached No. 27 on the Billboard Hot 100. In the U.K. it did even better, spending 75 weeks in the top 40—a record.

The song became a staple of Sinatra's live act and a fan favorite. But, according to Tina Sinatra, Frank did not actually care much for the song that many felt defined him. "He didn't like it," revealed Tina in a 2021 interview with the BBC. "That song stuck and he couldn't get it off his shoe. He always thought that song was self-serving and self-indulgent."

Sinatra may not have liked "My Way," but as the 1960s drew to a close he believed that the end really was near, at least as far as his career was concerned. Then, suddenly, he had a change of heart—one that paved the way for another 30-year run of iconic success.

CHAPTER 5

1970s

THE RETURN OF THE KING

Sinatra began the decade by abruptly retiring. Two years later, though, he was back—heavier and grayer, but as ambitious as ever—and still a star in every sense of the word.

LEADER OF THE BAND
In 1970, Sinatra performed at London's Royal Festival Hall, where he sounded as good as ever—and even took a turn on the conductor's podium (below).

On March 23, 1971, Frank Sinatra announced his retirement at age 55. It wasn't the first time that Sinatra had flirted with leaving show business. Six years earlier, when he'd recorded Ervin Drake's "It Was a Very Good Year," the focused yet nostalgic mood in the studio made many believe that Sinatra had chosen this as his swan song. Then came "That's Life," another musical summation of Frank's point of view. If this was the career capper, it also would have worked. But after that came "My Way"—which hit the nail right on the head with its starting lyric: "And now, the end is near..."

Yet every time Sinatra seemed to be saying his public goodbyes, he stuck around for another song. He wasn't being coy. Leaving it all behind really was a thought that kept popping up in Sinatra's mind starting in the mid-1960s. In '66, he told journalist Thomas Thompson that he was going to quit when he felt his voice was slipping. "When the vibrato starts to widen," Sinatra explained, as recounted in a 1971 LIFE magazine story about his retirement, "when the breath starts to give out."

But when he declared his intention to hang it up, Sinatra conceded that none of that had happened yet. There was no overt reason for him to go. He just felt like he was done. "I've had enough," he said in the LIFE article. "Maybe the public's had enough, too."

There was little reason to believe that fans were sick of Sinatra. In 1970, Frank performed nine live concerts, including two in London at the Royal Festival Hall. He was in fine voice throughout. His only studio album in 1970 was *Watertown* (Reprise), a concept album produced and co-written by Bob Gaudio of The Four Seasons. The release, which told the story of a man whose wife leaves him to raise two sons alone in Watertown, N.Y., featured narration and singing by Sinatra. It would be his only major album that failed to crack the Billboard Top 100, but it would later be hailed as an outstanding achievement on par with his finest work.

So ... why leave? Sinatra was in good health and wasn't ready to just sit by the pool. "I've got things to

RINGSIDE SINGER
On March 8, 1971, 15 days before he announced his retirement, Sinatra shot the Muhammad Ali–Joe Frazier fight at Madison Square Garden for LIFE magazine.

FINAL CURTAIN
On June 13, 1971, Sinatra ended his farewell show (right) with "Angel Eyes," leaving the stage after the song's final line: "Excuse me while I ... disappear."

do," he told LIFE, vaguely planning to pursue photography and gardening, and to finally perfect a skill that he had never quite mastered: watercolor painting.

Before doing any of that, Sinatra held his "farewell" concert on June 13 at L.A.'s Ahmanson Theatre in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The show was a fundraising benefit for the Motion Picture and TV Relief Fund, a charity that provided assistance to members of the entertainment industry who had aged past the point of being able to work and faced hard financial times. It was almost impossible to imagine that Sinatra would ever suffer a similar crisis himself, but when it came to such matters Frank never forgot his humble roots. Anything could happen to anyone, he firmly believed. "Riding high in April, shot down in May. ..."

The Hollywood royalty that gathered at his farewell concert included Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Barbra Streisand and pals like Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin and Don Rickles. They thought the show was over when Sinatra sang "My Way," but he fooled them by slipping into "Angel Eyes"—the Matt Dennis and Earl Brent number written in 1946 and recorded by Sinatra in 1958. Sinatra reached the final lyrics—"Excuse me while I ... disappear"—and then he was gone.

Fitting, poignant, perfect.

But less than two years later, he returned. First there was a TV special in 1973: Officially called *Magnavox Presents Frank Sinatra*, it was better known as "Ol' Blue Eyes Is Back." Watched by an estimated 40 million people, the program was a showcase for Magnavox to present their new products for 1974—including the Odyssey at-home video game system, one of the first such products of its kind. Despite the sponsor's goal of promoting modern innovations, the show was very nostalgic, and even included a

Every time Sinatra seemed to be saying his public goodbyes, he stuck around for another song.

reunion with Gene Kelly in which the two former movie musical co-stars sang and danced together for the first time in 30 years.

If the TV special was a popular success, the album that went with it was even bigger, selling more than 500,000 copies to earn gold status. Sinatra first recorded the songs for his comeback album at Goldwyn Studios on April 30, 1973. Symbolically, it was the 20th anniversary of Sinatra's first recording session with Nelson Riddle, but the results were not up to Frank's standards and he asked that the resulting tapes be destroyed.

Two months later, Sinatra tried again with a new set of songs. The standout from the sessions was Sinatra's version of "Send in the Clowns," written by Stephen Sondheim. With orchestration by Gordon Jenkins, the recording was vintage Sinatra and proof that he could still create a classic that was hard for any performer—of any age—to top.

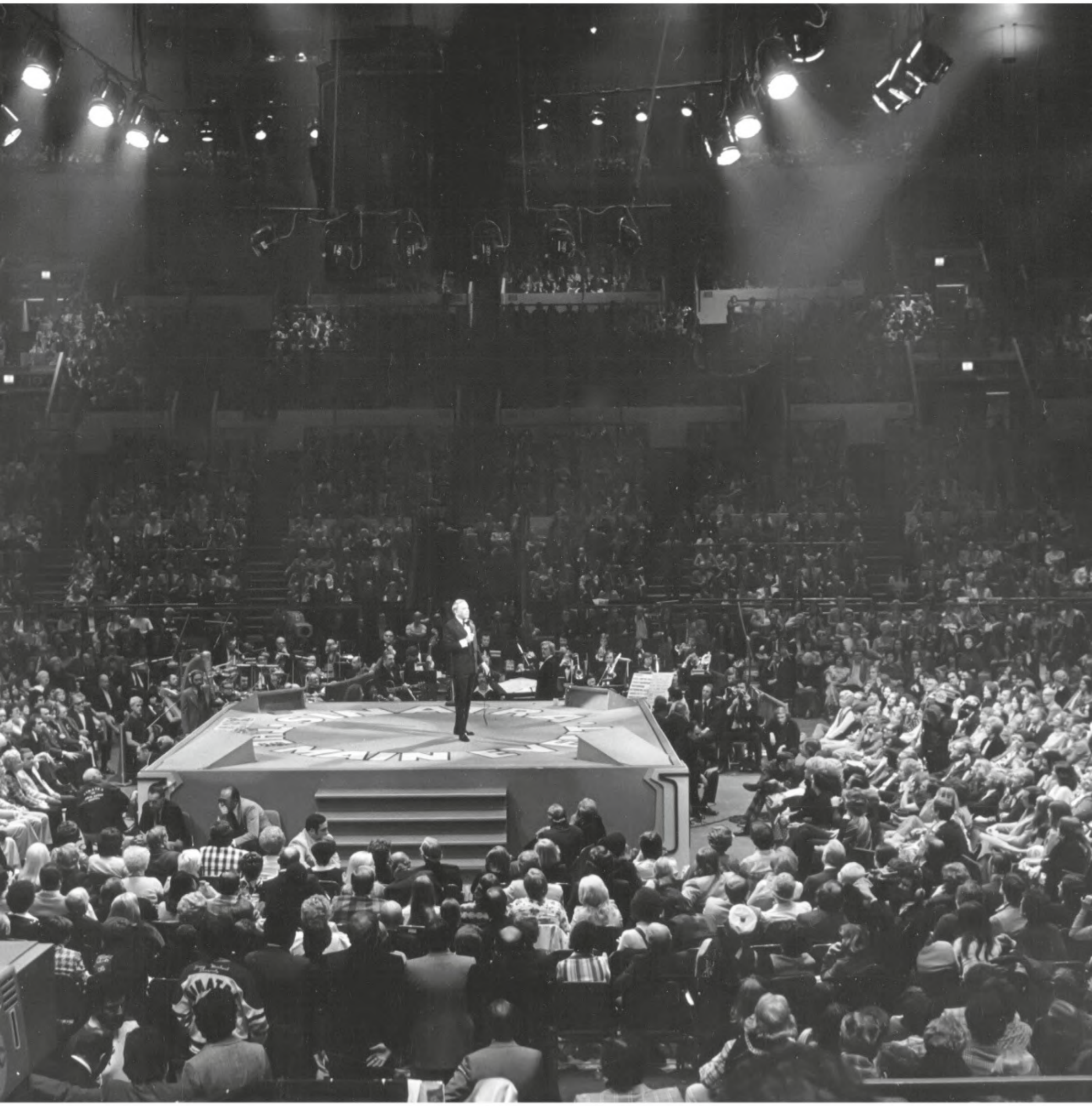
"I was at his home in Palm Springs when he received the song in the mail," sculptor Bob Berks recalls in the book *Sessions With Sinatra*. "We were sitting around the pool, and I was working away, and he sat down and opened the envelope. He smiled and asked if I'd like to hear a new song. He then proceeded to sing it to me. I was the first person to hear Sinatra sing that wonderful song."

Plans were set in motion for a global return to touring in 1974. Nearing his 60th birthday, Sinatra was back in the spotlight—but not without some missteps and insecurities. The famously rail thin performer had filled out considerably and his hair was now a toupee. Frank wasn't proud of how he looked, but he accepted it. He also drank and smoked more than he should, which was not good for his overall health or his voice.

Furthermore, Sinatra's previously impeccable gift for picking songs started to lead him astray when he veered from the Great American Songbook and experimented with newer material. The entire 1974 album *Some Nice Things I've Missed* featured Frank's versions of current pop songs like "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown," "Sweet Caroline," "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around the Ole Oak Tree," and "You Are the Sunshine of My Life." Even though he was musically supported by longtime collaborators Gordon Jenkins and Don Costa, the results didn't seem to serve Sinatra fans or fans of the songs themselves.

REPLAY REVUE
Three years after he said farewell, Sinatra returned to touring. At right, he performs at Madison Square Garden for the ABC special *Sinatra: The Main Event*.

CHAPTER 5



Additionally, with every passing year, Sinatra no longer reflected the modern standards or popular beliefs of the times. It wouldn't have been so much of a problem if Sinatra held his tongue. But that was never his style. He spoke his mind freely, and if trouble came as a result, so be it. This led to an ugly incident when Sinatra arrived for a concert in Melbourne, Australia, on July 9, 1974.

Never a fan of cooperating with the press, Sinatra refused to do interviews, which led to Australian reporters dredging up old stories about Sinatra and his rumored ties to organized crime. If there was one surefire way to get on Frank's bad side it was to bring up the mob—something that had hounded him from the very start of his career.

Sinatra considered it racist, and he fought back viciously whenever anyone implied that his career and success was in any way aided by the so-called mafia. He retaliated against the Australian press by saying: "They're parasites who take everything and give nothing. And as for the broads who work for the press, they're the hookers of the press. I might offer them a buck and a half. I'm not sure."

This caused an uproar in the country, with scheduled shows being canceled and even threats that Sinatra might be detained in the country until he apologized—something he absolutely insisted that he would not do.

In an era when bad press could still be contained and controlled, the bitter situation was not widely reported on back in America. Sinatra was not only able to return home, he never really had to answer for what he had said and was welcomed by fans as a conquering hero at live performances throughout the 1970s.

"Every night was a complete love-in with the people, just like being back in New York again, like coming home," Sinatra told an interviewer after a show in 1975.

According to the website setlist.fm, Sinatra staged 814 live performances from 1974 through '79. His biggest concert schedule during that period came in '76, when the 61-year-old Chairman of the Board gave 170 concerts during the course of a single year. To many fans, Sinatra wasn't just showing up in the '70s—he was a force who had knocked off the rust of his short early retirement to emerge stronger and more powerful with each passing performance.

VOICE OF THE WORLD
The concert tour that Sinatra undertook in 1974—as he was approaching 60 years old—took him around the globe. Above, he arrives in London on July 18.

PRESS GANG
When he went to Australia in 1974, Sinatra was hounded by the media with questions about his links to organized crime (right). He responded by calling them "parasites."

Some even consider his run of shows at New York City's Radio City Music Hall in 1978 to be his finest live performances ever.

Sinatra closed the decade with his most ambitious recording project in years, a three-record set called *Trilogy*. Sinatra took everything personally—and he applied a great deal of time, energy and commitment to make *Trilogy* as good as he was able. He reportedly said, "We will not do another thing until we do this," when he was first presented with the idea of recording a career-spanning concept album in three parts. Conceived by producer Sonny Burke, the first album was called *The Past* and featured Sinatra singing classic standards—most of which, amazingly, he had never before recorded, including "But Not for Me," "It Had to Be You," and "More Than You Know."

The second record, called *The Present*, featured Sinatra's take on more contemporary songs including "Love Me Tender," "Something" and "Just the Way You Are."

The third album, *The Future*, only contained original songs written especially for Sinatra by Gordon Jenkins and—with musical experiments like "World War None," "I've Been There!" and "Song Without Words"was more of a risk than anything else in the

collection. These songs were not only never-before heard, they were also tailored to be about the man and his life.

One of the tracks from *The Future* was a 10-minute song called "Before the Music Ends." Like "It Was a Very Good Year," "That's Life" and "My Way" it was another tune that showcased Frank Sinatra telling his own story—only this time, it was precisely Sinatra's story and could not be confused to be about anyone else:

I reached the age of forty somewhat sooner than expected,
Living at a fairly hectic pace.
When I count the years that I have happily collected,
The future shows its apprehensive face.
(But now, Francis, what the hell do you do now, Francis?)
Quite a different song must be sung
When the singer is no longer young.
Before the music ends, before it fades away,
There are several very necessary things I must do.
Friends, I must be again certain places where I must be again.
Before the music ends, I must go to Hoboken one more time.
I wanna run down that street where that thin Italian kid ran.
Then slow down at the school,
Where those nice old ladies tried to teach me,
Unaware that I knew much more than they did.
And stop at the poolroom for a beer,
And sadly say to myself, I don't know anybody here.
(Francis, don't go home again.)

Like he almost always did, Sinatra sang "Before the Music Ends" with real emotion and sincere conviction. He meant every word and felt every mood that was reflected. Perhaps for that reason, critics deemed the songs of *The Future* to be narcissistic.

Jonathan Schwartz, host of a radio show on WNEW-AM in New York City, went so far as to call *The Future* a "shocking embarrassment." These were uncommonly tough words for Sinatra, especially in his hometown, the place where he had always been welcomed more warmly than anywhere else—a place where his fans had once rioted at the prospect of seeing him perform. Appalled, Sinatra called the station and registered a complaint. Schwartz was promptly suspended for having offended a living legend.

PARTY FAVORITE
Sinatra was honored by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers for his gifts to music at a star-studded 64th birthday bash in Las Vegas.

Sinatra wasn't just showing up in the '70s—he was a force who had knocked off the rust of his short, early retirement.

CHAPTER 6

1980s

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

In his sixth decade as an entertainer, Sinatra made live concerts his priority. He still spent time in the studio, but his focus was on stage performances—and show-stopping numbers.

CHAPTER 6

Recorded mostly in 1979 but released in March 1980, Frank Sinatra's *Trilogy* album was a massively ambitious project that music critics and fans still work to figure out. More than 200 musicians and backup singers contributed to the three-record set. Sinatra himself quit smoking and trained to get in shape for recording.

Upon release it peaked at No. 17 on the Billboard 200 and was certified gold—impressive results for a triple album. Most agreed that the first record, *The Past*, featured Sinatra in finer voice than he had been since the '60s. They also agreed that the third record, *The Future*, was hard to figure out—"interesting" to fans who wanted to be kind, but not worth a second listen to pretty much everyone else. As for *The Present*—well, the second album was most notable for one very special song.

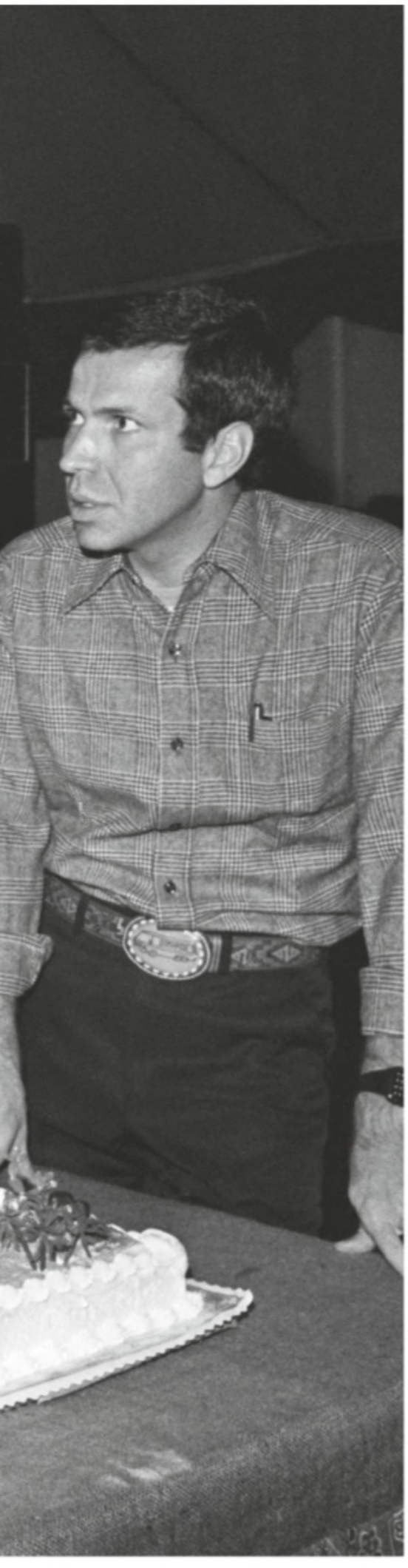
"Theme from 'New York, New York'" was composed by John Kander, with lyrics by Fred Ebb. Originally, the song had been commissioned for director Martin Scorsese's 1977 musical starring Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro. It was written especially for Minnelli to sing—although De Niro reportedly played a role in its composition when he rejected an earlier, different version of the theme as "too weak." Minnelli's rendition peaked at No. 104 on the Billboard charts in '77.

Sinatra first sang the song in October '78, during his 10-show engagement at Radio City Music Hall. His plan, on the occasion of his "hometown concert," was to string together several musical tributes to the city with a unifying overture by Don Costa. "Autumn in New York" would lead to "Sidewalks of New York" and then, lastly, "Theme from 'New York, New York'" would begin with Sinatra strutting to center stage to the rhythm of the song's swaggering opening. *Dat da da-da-da.*

The dramatic build-up worked perfectly. The crowds loved it—and why wouldn't they? Frank Sinatra in Radio City singing triumphantly about New York. It was a triple dose of the energy that made the city so iconic.

SPREADING THE NEWS
Sinatra sings at Carnegie Hall in his "hometown" in 1986. By this time, "Theme from 'New York, New York'" had replaced "My Way" as the centerpiece of his act.

CHAPTER 6



PARTY HOST
Dressed to fit the Western theme for Sinatra's 65th birthday bash, talk-show host Johnny Carson (above) arrives at the singer's ranch with wife, Joanna.

HACK THE KNIFE
Sinatra prepares to cut his birthday cake surrounded by his family. From left: fourth wife Barbara, daughters Nancy and Tina, and son, Frank Jr.

"After we had done it for that engagement, [Sinatra] said to me, 'Man! This thing is getting big—we've got to take it out. Can you take it out of the overture?'" remembered Costa in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "So I did, and then he just used it as the opening for the show. Then, he said, 'Nah, we've got to put it further down in the show.' And it went about halfway down, because 'My Way' was still closing the show. And the song just kept getting bigger! Well, all during this period of about a year, he started to grow with the song, and he began to put it into the shape that it eventually became. It didn't start out being as dramatic as it is now, with the much slower tempo at the end. That's not the way he originally sang it: He developed it."

Sinatra's version of "Theme from 'New York, New York'" peaked at No. 32 in June 1980. It was the final top 40 hit of his career. The song also became a staple of the concerts he performed over the course of the decade—his fifth in show business.

"Eventually the song got so powerful," said pianist Vinnie Falcone, "that Frank said, 'Let's take 'My Way' out of the show. I'm sick and tired of singing the song. I've been trying to find something to replace it for years, and we've finally gotten it.' For several years during that period, we didn't even do 'My Way' in the show—it was only performed when we went to Europe, or some other place abroad. 'New York, New York' became the closer."

Live-performing was Sinatra's livelihood in the '80s—a full-circle return to how it all began for him. According to setlist.fm, Sinatra staged more than 930 concerts during the decade. His opening performer for 14 years was comedian Tom Dreesen, a man who became a close friend and eyewitness to the final act of Sinatra's life.

"I was always a fan of his so I was obviously in awe of him, but I never let him see that. He had millions of fans and he didn't need another. He wanted

AMERICAN SON
President Ronald Reagan presents Sinatra with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1985 as fellow recipient Jeane Kirkpatrick (below, center) applauds.

TABLETOP DIPLOMACY
Sinatra supported Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign. At right, he attends a dinner with the Gipper, along with wife, Barbara (near left), and Nancy Reagan (far right).

a friend. At first, he was the boss, of course. He later became a friend, and in the end he was like a father to me," Dreesen told huffpost.com in a 2016 interview.

"Frank had a compound in Rancho Mirage and on the outer perimeter were bungalows called 'New York, New York,' 'Tender Trap,' 'My Way' and so on, named after his songs," continued Dreesen. "When I'd go down there to stay at his house, guests would be folks like Gregory Peck, Kirk Douglas, Jack Lemmon, Clint Eastwood, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, Robert Wagner, Isaac Stern, Admiral Shepherd and their wives. Women like Angie Dickinson, Jill St. John, Liza Minnelli and Barbara Sinatra. So the conversations were so stimulating and Frank would stay up till dawn and wanted everyone to stay up with him."

When he wasn't performing on stage, Sinatra spent the '80s doing whatever he wanted. Always politically active, he threw his support to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election and was the official organizer—and a performer—at both of the Gipper's inaugurations. In 1985, Reagan presented Sinatra with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. "His love of country, his generosity for those less fortunate ... make him one of our most remarkable and distinguished Americans," said the president upon giving Sinatra the award.

At home, Sinatra's personal life was settled with fourth wife, Barbara, whom he married in 1976. Sinatra also remained close to his three children—Nancy, Frank Jr. and Tina—and Frank Jr. joined his father in 1988 as musical director and stage conductor.

For a man who had spent so much of his middle age consumed by thoughts of retirement, the topic wasn't on the agenda during Sinatra's golden years. But while live performing remained a continued

COMIC RELIEF
Comedian Tom Dreesen (above) was Sinatra's opening act for 14 years, and eventually became one of the singer's most trusted confidants.

CAPITOL MEN
Sinatra with composer Nelson Riddle (far right) in 1958. The two had a falling out in the late 1970s, but patched things up shortly before Riddle's death in 1985.

source of pride for Sinatra—his crowds were a mix of people who remembered him from the beginning as well as much younger fans, which he found extremely gratifying—the singer was less focused on recording in the 1980s.

In part, he didn't need to lay down new tracks. His catalog was rich to the point of excess. And while the decade did produce some rousing recordings of songs such as "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?" (1983), "L.A. Is My Lady" (1984) and "Mack the Knife" (1984), Sinatra found a solution to his troubles of searching for suitable "new" songs by simply working less hard to try to find them.

When Sinatra did enter the studio in the 1980s, he depended on trusted colleagues and friends to support him. Some days, the old magic was in the room. Other times, it was missing—and when it was, Sinatra could sense it and did not hesitate to cut his losses and leave. He also didn't mind redoing whole sessions if he didn't feel what had been recorded was up to his standards.

"What separates Sinatra from everybody else is that as he aged, his approach to the material changed, and he developed a whole different way of performing his music," explained Vinnie Falcone in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "As he matured into the poet he eventually became, the songs became a narrative dialogue set to music, instead of just music with lyrics."

But Sinatra could not stop the inevitable reminders of mortality that come with the passage of time. The losses in the 1980s were not the most famous of Sinatra's closest acquaintances, but they were important people to him even if most fans weren't familiar with their names. Gordon Jenkins was one of the first to go, on May 1, 1984, of Lou Gehrig's Disease, just 11 days short of his 74th birthday. Jenkins was the author of *The Future* from *Trilogy*—the much-maligned suite of songs that only he and Sinatra seemed to appreciate.

In 1981, the two had teamed up again for the album *She Shot Me Down*, a collection of tunes sung in a saloon style that is best remembered for producing Sinatra's version of "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)," written by Sonny Bono, which had been a hit for Bono's then wife, Cher, in 1966.

Together, Jenkins and Sinatra enjoyed much success. But the source of their strongest bond was their shared capacity for less happy emotions. "Frank

Sinatra once told me that he and my father were the two saddest men," revealed Bruce Jenkins in a 2005 interview with SFGate.com. "I only knew the half of it. But then, everyone knew about Sinatra."

Another notable loss from the 1980s was Nelson Riddle. Like Sinatra, Riddle was a native of New Jersey, born in Oradell five years after the singer's birth. Professionally, the two men would team up at Capitol Records starting in 1953. At first, Sinatra was reluctant to accept Capitol's suggestion that he try Riddle as an arranger. Sinatra preferred Axel Stordahl, the man who had helped him achieve so much success at Columbia. But when the hits stopped coming with Stordahl, Sinatra opened his mind to trying something different.

The first single produced by the Sinatra-Riddle pairing was "I've Got the World on a String"—a smash hit that set the wheels in motion for Sinatra's first career comeback. More success quickly followed, but the two men had a falling out that started after Sinatra didn't appear as master of ceremonies at a dinner held in Riddle's honor in the late '70s.

Composer Billy May witnessed the rift firsthand during a conversation with Riddle in the early '80s. "I'd never heard him talk that way before," said May, as recounted in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "He was very

Live-performing was Sinatra's livelihood in the '80s—a full-circle return to how it all began for him.

vehement about how he didn't like Sinatra anymore, and how he felt he'd been taken advantage of, so I just kept quiet about it. Then I asked Nelson one day what happened. And he told me about the dinner. He said that he just felt that Frank was too egotistical to be a decent guy."

By January 1985, Riddle was seriously ill with a chronic liver condition. He and Sinatra patched up whatever hard feelings remained before it was too late. Sinatra intimated to his old friend that he was planning to return to the studio to record and that it would be great if Riddle might be willing to work on scoring the album. Despite his illness, Riddle said he'd love to work on the project—which, unfortunately, never came to be before he died in October at the age of 64.

"The day after Dad died, we went down to his office on Sunset Boulevard to take a look around," said Rosemary Riddle Acerra in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "We saw what was in the office, we saw what he was working on. There were charts for the new album they were going to work on sitting right there on the drafting table. They were marked 'Frank Sinatra.'"

On the eve of the new decade, Sinatra himself was showing some signs of needing to slow down. His touring schedule included 76 dates in 1989, down significantly from the 103 shows he had performed the year before. The man who leapt into the national spotlight in New York City the day before New Year's Eve in 1942 gave his final show of 1989 on Nov. 13 at the Shrine Auditorium near his home in Los Angeles. He was about to turn 75 and those closest to him—including son Frank Jr., who kept a close eye on his father at every show from his position on stage—could see the small signs of decline that were starting to become more noticeable: hearing loss, cataracts, moments of confusion and even bouts (sometimes mid-song) when Sinatra would forget the lyrics to numbers that he had sang hundreds of times before.

No one was quite sure how close the end really was, but—quietly and respectfully—friends, family and fans alike began to prepare for the inevitable. This made attending one of Sinatra's performances even more urgent. It didn't much matter if the show was good, bad or somewhere in between—if you had the opportunity to see Sinatra on stage, you didn't want to miss it.

MIKE MOVES
Sinatra during a 1989 concert (right). He did 76 shows that year, down from 103 in '88. Demand to see him was still strong—but no one knew how much longer he could go on.

CHAPTER 7

1990s

LARGER THAN LIFE
As the end drew near for Sinatra, it was clear that he had been one of the transformative American figures of the 20th century, leaving a legacy in music that few could match.

CHAPTER 7

In September 1990, pop singer George Michael gave an interview to the *Los Angeles Times* magazine *Calendar*, in which he lamented the personal cost of fame. "Most people find it hard to believe that stardom can make you miserable," said Michael, who at the time was a highly successful solo artist. "After all, everybody wants to be a star. I certainly did, and I worked hard to get it. But I was miserable, and I don't want to feel that way again."

Michael was 27 years old, the same age as Frank Sinatra when he played the Paramount in 1942. Perhaps aware of the coincidence—or maybe because he had a different point of view at age 75—Sinatra felt compelled to write to the *Times* with a letter of reply.

"When I saw your *Calendar* cover today about George Michael, 'the reluctant pop star,' my first reaction was he should thank the good Lord every morning when he wakes up to have all that he has," Sinatra wrote. "And that'll make two of us thanking God every morning for all that we have.

"I don't understand a guy who lives 'in hopes of reducing the strain of his celebrity status." Here's a kid

SAD GOODBYES
In 1990, Sinatra lost two of his best friends: ex-wife Ava Gardner (far left) in January, and then Sammy Davis Jr. (below, right, with Dionne Warwick and Sinatra).

PARTNER IN RHYME
At the 1994 Grammys, Bono (above, left) presented a Legend award to Sinatra. One year earlier, the U2 frontman had appeared on Sinatra's album *Duets*.

FRIENDS TO THE END
Sinatra also sang on *Duets* with Tony Bennett (right, on 1977's *Sinatra and Friends* TV special). The two crooners remained close throughout Sinatra's life.

who 'wanted to be a pop star since I was about 7 years old,' and now that he's a smash performer and songwriter at 27 he wants to quit doing what tons of gifted youngsters all over the world would shoot Grandma for—just one crack at what he's complaining about.

"Come on, George. Loosen up. Swing, man. Dust off those gossamer wings and fly yourself to the moon of your choice and be grateful. ... And no more of that talk about 'the tragedy of fame.' The tragedy of fame is when no one shows up and you're singing to the cleaning lady in some empty joint. ..."

The letter made headlines. Some people sided with Michael and even poked fun at Frank's dated language and take on the topic. Others agreed with Sinatra. No matter which side you were on, what was clear was that the topic mattered to Sinatra. He had a passionate perspective. To care that much, it's likely that he wasn't really commenting on George Michael or even fame—he was talking about himself.

Sinatra had good reason to reflect by the end of 1990. During the course of the year he lost second wife Ava Gardner on Jan. 25 and close friend Sammy Davis Jr., on May 16. Sinatra's own health was gradually starting to deteriorate as well.

"He can't drink after he takes his medicine," a close associate told author Charles L. Granata. "If he has even one drink, it throws him off completely." During live performances in the 1990s—of which there were 394 between 1990 and '95—Sinatra relied on huge screen monitors placed around the stage to remind him of lyrics. Even with that aid, he made mistakes.

Sinatra found these mental lapses embarrassing as well as unprofessional. In an interview with Kevin Nealon, comedian Tom Dreesen recalled a particular show when he thought it might be the end of the line for the friend he lovingly called "Mr. S."

In Dreesen's memory, Sinatra was 78, placing the show roughly in 1994. "There's like 20,000 people in the arena, and I did my thing and it was a good audience," said Dreesen. "He went out and did three songs. He was rolling. And then he got on the fourth song and he totally blanked on the lyrics. The orchestra was down in the pit and they kept playing, not knowing that he was lost. And he started whispering into the microphone, 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry.'

"I was stage left and I thought, 'OK, this is it. I'm going to say, 'Let's go home, Mr. S. It's been a great career, but it's time to go home.'

In the ’90s, everyone knew the end—of something—was near for Frank Sinatra.

“He turned around. There was dead silence. He had tears in his eyes. And he looked like he was going to come and lay the microphone down. ... And a guy way up at the top of the audience stood up by himself, and he hollered out, ‘That’s all right, Frank! It’s all right because we love you!’ And he started to applaud. And the guy next to him started to applaud, and then hundreds of people started to applaud and then thousands. And pretty soon, the whole arena was cheering and cheering.

“[Sinatra] went into the next number, which was ‘Mack the Knife,’ and he absolutely drilled that song. He hit every nuance and every lyric. It was like he was 19 years old again. ... He was ready to go on to the next number when he quieted them down. And he started to sing, and he stopped, pointed up to the guy, and said, ‘I love you, too, pal.’ ... And he sang for two years after that. That fan brought him from the ashes that night.”

In the ’90s, everyone knew the end—of something—was near for Frank Sinatra. The task was to figure out what should be done before it was too late. The opportunity for Sinatra’s final recordings came courtesy of producer Phil Ramone. The project originated in 1992 when Ramone—legendary for his work with artists ranging from James Taylor

A CROONER'S CAKE
Along with his wife Barbara (below, right), Sinatra attended a celebration for his 80th birthday at New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel on Nov. 30, 1995.

MOVING TRIBUTE
At a birthday concert in L.A., most stars performed versions of Sinatra's hits. But Bob Dylan (far right) stole the show by singing one of his own: "Restless Farewell."

to Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles to (yes) George Michael—shared his desire to record a Sinatra album that featured The Voice singing with a variety of artists, all captured with modern equipment that would document Sinatra at this stage of his life and career.

To pull it off required technical wizardry, as it was virtually impossible to get all the artists in the same studio. The project also meant getting the best out of the rapidly aging—and eternally impatient—Sinatra.

Thankfully, Ramone had little trouble convincing the necessary talent to work with Frank. Everyone knew what was at stake and jumped at the chance to work with a legend who literally defined what it meant to be a singing star in the modern world.

One such person was recording engineer Al Schmitt. "People would ask me, 'Do you have any regrets about your career?'" said Schmitt in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "I would always tell them, 'I only have one regret: I never got to work with Frank Sinatra.' Then, all of a sudden, the phone rang and it was Phil, asking me to do Sinatra. So it was a big thrill for me."

Convincing Sinatra himself wasn't easy. Ramone promised him complete authority to pick who he wanted to work with as well as the songs they would do together. The first artist Frank asked about was a friend he had long admired. "How's Ella doing?"

Ella Fitzgerald was not healthy enough to participate, but an astonishing array of talent—old and

WARM RECEPTION
Surrounded by his celebrity friends at the L.A. birthday concert, Sinatra listens to the words of his longtime pal, comedian Don Rickles (below, with microphone).

FINAL SPOTLIGHT
Near the end of the birthday show—his last public appearance—Sinatra stood alone on stage (right) and basked in a standing ovation from the crowd.

young—was brought on board, including Tony Bennett, Barbra Streisand, Aretha Franklin and Bono.

The duets themselves included new renditions of familiar tunes such as "Summer Wind," "They Can't Take That Away From Me," "I've Got the World on a String" and "New York, New York." In almost all cases, Sinatra's original arrangements were used, bringing old friends like Nelson Riddle back to musical life.

To make it work required Sinatra to sing separately from his partners. He sang every song all the way through. Later, his duet partner would sing based on Sinatra's track. Then the two artists would be merged together into a single duet through sound editing.

Ideally, Sinatra would sing in a recording booth, something common in the industry for decades, but never the way Sinatra worked. Instead, Sinatra liked to sing with the orchestra—recreating the atmosphere of a live performance at a club or concert. As Sinatra was nearing 80, there was little confidence that he would be comfortable so dramatically changing the way he worked in the studio—especially to record an album that he simply didn't need to make.

The production faced many false starts and sudden stops to accommodate Sinatra. Sometimes, Frank would arrive for his scheduled session at the studio, take one look at the environment set up for him to sing, then turn around and leave. In one such session, Sinatra pulled Ramone aside and unleashed hell on the producer for 10 minutes.

"He just kept asking me why we were exposing ourselves to this kind of possible ridicule," recalled Ramone in *Sessions With Sinatra*. "I said, 'Francis, we need to do this record because we promised each other that we would make a record that is of this time... And I said, 'It's the legacy of you. I want my children and my grandchildren to know who Sinatra is at this most important moment...' He said, 'All right, well, we'll give it a try.'"

The resulting sessions produced two albums: *Duets* (Capitol, 1993) and *Duets II* (Capitol, 1994). The first release went triple platinum in the U.S. with 3 million albums—and CDs—sold. The sequel sold more than a million copies and holds the historical distinction of being Frank Sinatra's final studio album produced with his personal involvement.

A year after *Duets II* was released, Sinatra performed live just once in 1995—the final concert of his life and career. The occasion was a private party

"His work is the soundtrack to countless lives—old and young, and those yet to be born."

Musical styles have come and gone, but Frank Sinatra remains—a timeless classic.

for 1,200 guests on the closing night of the Frank Sinatra Desert Classic golf tournament. Performing a six-song set, he started with "You Make Me Feel So Young" and ended with "The Best Is Yet to Come."

Sinatra would appear publicly another time in 1995, at the celebration for his 80th birthday. Sitting in the audience, he listened to such artists as Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen interpret his songs back to him. Times had changed in music, and everyone knew that Frank Sinatra was not going to be an active participant in whatever came next.

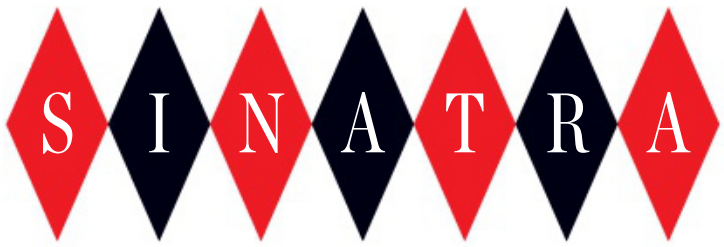
His remaining two and a half years happened away from public scrutiny. Suffering from heart problems, bladder cancer and dementia, the prideful Sinatra did not make a show of his decline, slipping away with quiet dignity on May 14, 1998. He was 82 years old.

But then, as he had done so many times before, Sinatra made a comeback. In the 2000s, his perspectives on everything from fashion and style to life itself became hip again. So did the Rat Pack—reinvented, rebooted and reapplied to any collection of talent that hung out together and made everyone envious of how cool it must be to be them. Sinatra's jargon returned, too. The cocktails he drank. The way he cocked his fedora. Even one of his most famous quotes—"You only live once, and the way I live, once is enough"—was adopted by a new generation as the social media slogan "YOLO."

And, of course, there was the music. It always comes back to the music. Sinatra has sold more than 150 million records. His work is the soundtrack to countless lives—old and young, and those yet to be born. His songs are destined to be played whenever people fall in love, celebrate an occasion, feel frisky or seek comfort in moments of loneliness and sorrow.

Musical styles have come and gone, but Frank Sinatra remains—a timeless classic who poured everything into what he was trying to share with audiences, from bobby-soxers in the 1940s to neo-hipsters in the modern age. Call his music what you want—swing, standards, the Great American Songbook—what Sinatra captured and communicated in song was bigger than any category. It was nothing short of the human condition set to music, a reflection of life's ups and downs, the emotional ebb and flow of getting through each day, and the eternal effort to be able to look in the mirror, respect what you see and always keep moving forward.

NATIONAL HEIRLOOM
For his contributions to American popular music, Sinatra belongs to the ages. And his songs—about love, happiness, heartbreak and sorrow—will play forever.



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SINATRA

"May you live to be 100, and may the last voice you hear be mine."
—Frank Sinatra